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In: Andersen, E., Lähnemann, H., Simon, A, ed. A Companion to Mysticism and Devotion in Northern Germany in the Late Middle Ages.

Leiden: Brill, 2013, pp.1-19.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/9789004258457_002

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Further information on publisher website: <http://www.brill.com/>

Date deposited: 25th March 2014

Version of chapter: Author pre-print



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Pre-print version from:

[Companion to Mysticism and Devotion in Northern Germany in the Late Middle Ages](#), ed. by Elizabeth Andersen, Henrike Lähnemann and Anne Simon (Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 44), Leiden 2013, pp. 1–19. ISBN 9789004257931

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Introduction: Mysticism and Devotion in Northern Germany

Elizabeth Andersen, Henrike Lähnemann & Anne Simon

In the late Middle Ages Northern Germany made a distinctive contribution to the literature of mysticism and devotion that has not yet been fully recognised. Indeed, it is almost a century since Wolfgang Stammer wrote the only study on the history of mysticism in this region; a review of the rich material is long overdue.¹ Although the writings of the outstanding visionaries in the thirteenth century from the convent of Helfta have been the focus of much research, what followed them in the following centuries has not. This volume starts with Mechthild of Magdeburg, Mechthild of Hackeborn and Gertrude of Helfta, before turning to the later anonymous devotional writing that feeds off and engages with the mystical tradition. What emerges clearly is the substantial and vibrant nature of the texts produced by communities of women, such as the nuns in the Lüneburg convents, who write learnedly in Latin and fervently in Low German. Through adopting a flexible concept of mystical culture, the volume plots the texts that are discussed on a spectrum that embraces mysticism and devotion. The continuum that results demonstrates the interconnection of popular devotional works and exclusive mystical writing. Where in previous scholarship the focus on the individual visionaries of Helfta had effectively silenced the later communal voice, here a strong case is made for recognising the significant contribution of the anonymous devotional voice in the transmission of mysticism as a regional phenomenon.

The first part of the volume deals with the beginnings and formations of much of the material which shapes later thinking in Northern Germany in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It sees the arrival of mystical writing and reading under the influence of the Low Countries, with Mechthild of Magdeburg as an outstanding figure, and the convent of Helfta as an important centre. The second part stretches into the fifteenth century, tracing the impact of reforms, transformations and ideas generated in the previous centuries, and foregrounding the devotional aspect of mystical thinking. The surge of different forms of religious movements in the Low Countries, Scandinavia and East Prussia sees the Hanseatic region as a centre of cultural exchange in the later Middle Ages, not least of texts, ideas and modes of reading and writing.

In this process of cultural exchange, transmission and translation are key activities, as is the monastic practice of *ruminatio*, a practice revived in the *Devotio moderna*. Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen, one of the first Brothers of the Common Life (→ Bollmann), tells his reader that:

¹ Stammer, »Studien zur Geschichte der Mystik in Norddeutschland« (1922); revised version in *Altdeutsche und Altniederländische Mystik*, ed. Ruh (Wege der Forschung 23) (1964). *Abendländische Mystik im Mittelalter. Germanistische Symposien. Berichtsbände VII*, ed. Ruh (1986). Neither Walter Haug's survey *Deutsche Mystik im abendländischen Zusammenhang. Neu erschlossene Texte, neue methodische Ansätze, neue theoretische Konzepte* (2000), nor the new Study Book edited in 2012 by Peter Dinzelbacher, *Deutsche und niederländische Mystik des Mittelalters. Ein Studienbuch*, identifies Northern Germany as a distinct region. The seminal longitudinal studies by Kurt Ruh and Bernard McGinn on the development of mysticism take different routes in their exploration of religious writing in Europe. In their discussion of vernacular mysticism they distinguish between German and Dutch mysticism but do not differentiate further. McGinn, *The Presence of God*, 5 vols. (1994ff). Vol. V: *The varieties of vernacular mysticism (1350–1550)* (2012). Ruh, *Geschichte der abendländischen Mystik*, 4 vols. (1990ff). Vol. 4: *Die niederländische Mystik des 14. bis 16. Jahrhunderts* (1999).

Meditacio vero dicitur qua ea que legisti vel audisti, studiosa ruminacione in corde tuo diligenter pertractas, et per ea affectum tuum circa aliquod certum inflammas vel illuminas intellectum. (*De spiritualibus ascensionibus*, chapter XLV, → Hascher-Burger).

Meditation means to ponder in your heart in studious rumination those things you have read or heard, and through this you will ignite your feelings about a specific matter and you will also enlighten your intellect.

Continuation and amplification become the preferred mode of text production. By following lines of transmission, the two parts of the volume represent different stages in the life of a continuously expanding and changing corpus of texts. Transmission is considered at various levels: ranging from practical questions of how manuscripts transported and changed the focus of texts to the integration of mystical thought into devotional practice.

The Genesis of the Volume

The volume had its origins in a shared interest of the Newcastle-based editors in how mystical and devotional texts worked, and whether in particular there were any links between Mechthild of Magdeburg's writing in the thirteenth century, on which Elizabeth Andersen had published, and the prolific prayer book production of the Lüneburg convents in the fifteenth century which Henrike Lähnemann was cataloguing. Constructing the *Companion* was planned as an open process, involving an interdisciplinary and international group of scholars who would work as a team from the very start. Thus, fifteen scholars from four different disciplines (German literature, history, musicology, theology) and working in three different languages (English, German and Dutch), each with their own epistemological background and methodological approach, met at a specially convened workshop in Newcastle in 2010.

In order to develop a coherent concept for the volume, the workshop centred on three key questions:

1. How is the span of the timeframe to be structured?
2. How is Northern Germany to be defined?
3. How is mysticism to be defined in the context of this volume?

The three questions proved to be inextricably interlinked; the periodization had to start with the specific religious and political circumstances of the geographical region in the later Middle Ages, while a working definition of mysticism had to be determined by the evidence of the texts produced and read there. The two female centres of rich text production provided the anchoring for all three questions: Helfta with the writings of Mechthild of Magdeburg, Gertrude the Great and Mechthild of Hackeborn marked the starting point in the thirteenth century while the other end of the time scale was determined by the text production of the Lüneburg convents between the reform movement of the mid-fifteenth century and the Lutheran Reformation. That the Lutheran Reformation is not so much a cut-off point as one further transformation of religious life has rightly been emphasised in recent years.² However, for the purposes of this volume, we have focused on the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries.

² Gottes Nähe unmittelbar erfahren. Mystik im Mittelalter und bei Martin Luther, ed. Hamm / Leppin (2007). Cf. for Northern Europe the Antwerp conference 1517-1545: *The Northern Experience. Mysticism, Art, and Devotion in Northern Europe between the Late Medieval and Early Modern Periods* (2013).

The texts that are the subject of the following chapters are largely authored by women, with a particular clustering of texts from the convent of Helfta and the Lüneburg convents.³ The richness of the writing from these convents provided a rare opportunity to explore text production in women's networks.⁴ Male religious feature largely in a support role, in their function as confessors to their spiritual charges. They are more prominent in the cases of Birgitta of Sweden (→ Andersen) and Dorothea of Montau (→ Suerbaum), who lived much of their lives in the secular world as wives and mothers. In these cases the male confessors are instrumental in the shaping of their lives according to hagiographic conventions.

The grouping of the chapters into two parts allows Helfta and Lüneburg to emerge clearly as two poles: on the one hand Helfta as a centre of visionary mysticism and on the other the Lüneburg convents as a centre of devotional writing that drew on the mystical tradition exemplified by Helfta. The broad titles: Part I »Beginnings and Formations. Mystical Culture and the Helfta Circle« and Part II »Transmission, Transformation and Exchange. Devotional Culture and the Lüneburg Convents« indicate that we are less concerned with periodization than we are in capturing shifting modes and perceptions of mysticism and devotion. In the contextualisation of themes central to the volume, it became clear that a synchronic approach was sometimes more productive, which led to us working with the concept of shared knowledge (*Wissensgemeinschaft* as in the case of Helfta) or a »conventual network« (*Klosterlandschaft* as in the case of the Lüneburg convents). A common ground of spiritual understanding is demonstrated, for example, by how all visionaries connected with Helfta claim to have received the titles of their work from God Himself and the word-for-word correspondence of passages as in the description of Mechthild of Hackeborn's death (→ Hellgardt). The conventual network is evident in the familial relationships as demonstrated by correspondence between the Lüneburg convents. The Abbess of Medingen, Elizabeth I. of Elvern, sends to the convent of Lüne »to the devout virgins Dorothy Elvers and Anne Schomaker, her most beloved nieces« small presents for their »wedding day« (investiture) at (→ Schlotheuber). These close relationships are further reflected in recurrent figures of thought in the devotional writing of the Lüneburg convents, as in the writing about the celebration of Easter in Wienhausen and Medingen (→ Mattern, Lähnemann). In other chapters of the volume, a diachronic approach seemed more appropriate, thus, for example, the influence of the *Devotio moderna* on reform movements such as the Bursfelde Reform (→ Bollmann, Hascher-Burger) or the tracing of networks of transmission as in the reception of the revelations of Birgitta of Sweden (→ Andersen).⁵

The second of the key questions concerned the definition of Northern Germany which in the Middle Ages was neither a recognised geographical nor a political unit. We use the term to refer principally to that area that roughly corresponds to the present-day Federal States [*Bundesländer*] of Lower Saxony, Hamburg, Bremen, the Holstein part of Schleswig Holstein, Saxony Anhalt, Meck-

³ Survey for Helfta in: Bynum, »Women Mystics in the Thirteenth Century: The Case of the Nuns of Helfta« (1984); Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book. Gender and the Making of Textual Authority* (2004); Nemes, *Von der Schrift zum Buch – vom Ich zum Autor. Zur Text- und Autorkonstitution in Überlieferung und Rezeption des »Fließenden Lichts der Gottheit« Mechthilds von Magdeburg* (2010). For the Lüneburg convents: Hascher-Burger, *Verborgene Klänge. Inventar der handschriftlich überlieferten Musik aus den Lüneburger Frauenklöstern bis ca. 1550* (2008); *Passion und Ostern in den Lüneburger Klöstern*, ed. Koldau (2010); Schlotheuber, *Klostereintritt und Bildung. Die Lebenswelt der Nonnen im späten Mittelalter. Mit einer Edition des »Konventstagebuchs« einer Zisterzienserin von Heilig-Kreuz bei Braunschweig (1484-1507)* (2004).

⁴ Cf. Frauen – Kloster – Kunst: Neue Forschungen zur Kulturgeschichte des Mittelalters edited by Jeffrey F. Hamburger (2007) accompanying the 2005 exhibition on female monasticism Krone und Schleier. Kunst aus mittelalterlichen Frauenklöstern (catalogue translated as Crown and Veil 2008). For the Low Countries cf. Scheepsmas, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries. The Modern Devotion, the Canonesses of Windesheim, and their Writings* (2004).

⁵ Cf. Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy* (2001) and the forthcoming *Companion to Birgitta of Sweden* in Brill's series of Companions to the Christian Tradition, also edited by Claire L. Sahlin.

lenburg Vorpommern and Brandenburg. As there is no single criterion that allows us to demarcate the region, we have included three intersecting maps as appendices. These offer complementary perspectives on what constitutes Northern German in the context of this volume: a map of the Hanseatic League (Map 1), a dialect map (Map 2) and a map of pertinent religious houses (Map 3).⁶ The economic alliance of the Hanseatic League dominated trade in Northern Europe, stretching from the Baltic to the North Sea. The trading routes ran west to east from Bruges in Flanders to cities on or near the Baltic such as Gdańsk, Reval and Novgorod and from north to south, connecting Scandinavia with Nuremberg, Augsburg and Venice. In the creation of wealth, trade establishes and fosters contacts and networks that facilitate not only economic but also cultural exchange. The printing of Birgitta of Sweden's *Revelationes* in Lübeck and the translation/adaptation of them into Low German are illustrative of the channels of transmission and influence which the trading networks of the Hanseatic League opened up in Northern Germany and Scandinavia. This is closely coupled with links that were established in the Low German area through the Beguine movement, the *Devotio moderna* and the convent reforms.

Linguistically, we identify »Northern Germany« as the area in which Low German is spoken, although it should be noted that in the towns all around the Baltic that belonged to the Hanseatic League Low German was a *lingua franca*. The second map marks out the various medieval dialects of German, distinguishing most clearly between Low and High German. Where the Lüneburg convents are firmly in the North Low Saxon area, Helfta is close to the boundary between Low German and the Central German dialect of Upper Saxon. To the West, Low German is closer to Middle Dutch than it is to Middle High German. Indeed, they would have been mutually comprehensible and are more accurately described as dialects than as separate languages. Thus, the Dutch and Low German songbooks have a shared repertoire, for example the Low German »Dialogue between God and the Soul« in the *Wienhausen Songbook* (→ Appendix 11a) is also transmitted in a Dutch manuscript and a Dutch print.

The Low Countries and Northern Germany constituted a coherent cultural region. This is still clearly evident today in the shared architectural features of the Hanseatic towns; the cityscapes of Lübeck and Rostock have more in common with Antwerp than they do with Nuremberg. In the late Middle Ages the Beguine way of life, followed by Mechthild of Magdeburg, had its origins in the diocese of Liège, while the Brothers of the Common Life radiated out from Deventer, via Münster to Rostock, bringing with them the influence of the *Devotio moderna*. The parameters of this cultural rather than political region are indicated by Hadewijch of Brabant's *List of the Perfect*, which explicitly mentions areas such as Saxony (*Mine, clusenerse die varre dore Sassen lach, daer ic herren Heynrecke van Breda toe seinde. »Mine, a female recluse who dwells far away in Saxony, to whom I sent Master Henry of Breda«*).

The thirteenth century world map found in Ebstorf, one of the Lüneburg convents, highlights the sense of regional identity and pride in the prominence given to Northern German cities and religious houses on the map (Illustration 2). The world is represented in the conventional T-scheme that divides it into three sections with Asia occupying the top half, Africa at the bottom right and Europe at the bottom left. Northern Germany dominates, with Ebstorf and Lüneburg marked out clearly. The map also shows the seats of the local bishops, Verden and Bremen, as well as the seat of the Duke of Brunswick. The detailed Latin description surrounding the circle of the world, written by several hands, most likely from the convent of Ebstorf around 1300, shows the high standard

⁶ For current literature on these areas cf. *Die Hanse*, ed. Hammel-Kiesow (2009); Peters, »Katalog sprachlicher Merkmale zur variablenlinguistischen Erforschung des Mittelniederdeutschen« (1987/ 1988/ 1990); *Niedersächsisches Klosterbuch. Verzeichnis der Klöster, Stifte, Kommenden und Beginenhäuser in Niedersachsen und Bremen von den Anfängen bis 1810*, ed. Dolle (2012).

of learning in the Lüneburg area in the thirteenth century.⁷ This level of literacy in Latin (*latinitas*) was maintained well into the fifteenth century as evidenced by the Latin Easter ceremonials read by the nuns of Wienhausen (→ Mattern), the prayer books written by the nuns of Medingen (→ Lähnemann) and the letters written by the nuns of Lüne (→ Schlotheuber).

The third and most complex of the three questions was that of how mysticism was to be defined within the context of this volume. Mysticism is a vexed concept with a range of competing definitions. However, there is consensus that at the centre of this concept is the experience of *unio mystica*, union with the Godhead in a state of ecstasy. Some would restrict the definition of mysticism to this alone, whereas others would include visionary and prophetic experience as well. With particular reference to the fifteenth century, we have what has been termed the »democratisation of mysticism«. ⁸ In this »democratisation« the singular experience of *unio mystica* is made accessible to others through devotional writing, allowing the reader an imaginative, contemplative approach to the experience which may result in the experience itself. Mechthild of Magdeburg may serve as a useful example to illustrate the relationship between mysticism and devotion as the two terms are conceived in this volume. In *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit* there are two principal modes of expression: the ecstatic mystical voice and the authoritative prophetic voice. The first is concerned with Mechthild's direct experience of God, the second with a message from God.⁹ The pure definition of mysticism which would restrict it to »mystical union« (*unio mystica*) maintains that only a few are graced with this experience and that it is not attainable through preparatory exercises. Mechthild, however, presents the mystical path to God as a way that is accessible to all loving souls, even if it does not always culminate in mystical union: *Lieber gottes fründ, disen minneweg han ich dir gescriben, got muesse in an din herze geben! Amen* (»Dear friend of God, I have described this path of love to you, may God bestow it on your heart! Amen«) (I, 44, 94–95). As an integral literary work, *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit* eludes categorisation in terms of a single genre, containing as it does a miscellany of visions, auditions, dialogues, monologues, prayers, hymns, love poetry, letters, allegories, parables and narratives. If Mechthild's book had to be assigned to one category of writing, then probably it would be best accommodated under the general heading of 'devotional literature', that is »literature written for the faithful and intended to develop or heighten feelings of devotion towards God or the saints [...] Moreover [it] is didactic in that it speaks about the proper Christian life and about the proper relationship between the individual and the divine«. ¹⁰

For the purposes of this volume we decided to adopt the fluid concept of *mystieke cultuur* (»mystical culture«) as developed by Thom Mertens. Rather than drawing sharp distinctions, Mertens posits a model that encompasses speculative mysticism, affective mysticism and devotional piety in overlapping circles.¹¹ This is:

een cultuur waarin het wereldbeeld, de waarden en de levensvormen bepaald worden door hetgeen mystici leren, een cultuur waarin het leven van de mystica of mysticus bij uitstek als het ideale, nastrevenswaardige voorbeeld geldt.

⁷ Cf. the chapters on the Ebstorf map (»Die Ebstorfer Weltkarte: Wissensvermittlung – Datierung – Bildung«) in *Kloster und Bildung im Mittelalter*, ed. Kruppa / Wilke (2006), especially the article by Hartmut Kugler »Die Ebstorfer Weltkarte ohne Gervasius von Tilbury« and his new edition of the Ebstorf map: *Die Ebstorfer Weltkarte. Kommentierte Neuausgabe in zwei Bänden* (2007).

⁸ Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology. Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (1963), 341.

⁹ Andersen, *The voices of Mechthild of Magdeburg* (2000), 183; McGinn, *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete* (1994), 335.

¹⁰ Petroff, *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* (1986), 3.

¹¹ Mertens, »Mystieke cultuur en literatuur in de Late Middeleeuwen«, 118–119. In similar vein, with particular reference to the fifteenth century, Williams-Krapp, »Mystikdiskurse und mystische Literatur im 15. Jahrhundert« (2012), 262.

a culture in which the world view, the values held and the way of life are determined by what the mystics teach, a culture in which the life of the male or female mystic is particularly considered to be an ideal model, worthy of emulation.

The adoption of this definition is reflected in the title of the volume; the texts discussed are plotted on a spectrum that embraces both mysticism and devotion. Mystical writing and devotional reading are closely intertwined as the discussion of divine authorship in the Prologue to Gertrude of Helfta's *Legatus divinae pietatis* shows; after God has given Gertrude the title for her book, He adds:

Si quis cum devota intentione spiritualis profectus in hoc libro legere desideraverit, ipsum mihi attraham in tantum quod quasi inter manus meas leget in eo, et ego memetipsum illi in hoc opere sociabo, ut sicut fieri solet quando duo legentes in una pagina, unus alterius sentiat flatum, sic ego intraham flatum desideriorum ipsius.... (Appendix 3a)

If anyone wishes to read this book with the devout intention of spiritual progress, I shall draw them so closely to me that they will read it as if my own hands were holding the book and I myself shall keep them company at the task. As when two people are reading the same page, each is aware of the other's breath, so shall I draw in the breath of their longings.

In similar vein, a passage which recounts the impact of reading Seuse's *Horologium Sapientiae* (»Book of the Eternal Wisdom«) *andachtich* (»devoutly in the convent of Diepenveen«) reports:

Soe sach sie dat hoer vuorrighe stralen wtten monde ghenghen, hent totten spynrocken toe, gheliek der sonnen van mannigherhande warwen, telken dat hoer die woerde wtten monde ghenghen. Daer toende onse lieue Here hoe andachtich, dat hoer harte tot hem was. (Appendix 10c)

Then she saw that whenever the words came out of her mouth, so did rays of fire going towards her distaff, just like the many colours of the sun. In this way Our Dear Lord showed how devoutly her heart was turned towards Him.

Thus, the discussions generated by the three key questions of periodization, geographical division and the definition of mysticism in the Newcastle workshop of 2010 proved to be seminal for the final shape of the volume. The chapters have been grouped chronologically into two parts, the spatial dimensions of Northern Germany developed through a focus on networks and communities and the concept of mysticism interpreted in terms of a *mystieke cultuur* embracing both mysticism and devotion.

The Shape of the Volume

The chronological division of the volume into two parts should not obscure the focus on a number of overarching themes that bind the volume together, most notably the centrality of the liturgy in the recording of religious experience; the adaptation and transmission of texts in networks; literacy in Latin and the vernacular. The volume opens with a chapter which considers the seminal role of the liturgy in Northern German convents from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century as a catalyst for both mystical experience and devotional practice (→ Bärsch). The visions of Mechthild of Hackeborn and Gertrude of Helfta are regularly triggered by the ritual of the liturgy. For example, in the *Legatus divinae pietatis* (»The Herald of God's Loving-Kindness«), Gertrude experiences a mystical vision of Christ as a beautiful young man during one of the monastic hours of the day (Appendix 6c). The translation into Middle High German elaborates this experience, identifying the hour as Compline: *Do stund ich noch einer Completen mitten uf dem slofhus. Do sach ich einen zarten schönen júngeling wol by xvj joren* (»Then after Compline I stood in the middle of the dormitory. Then I saw a beautiful young boy, about sixteen years of age«). At the other end of the spectrum, a fifteenth century prayer book from Medingen illustrates how devotional practice within the performance of the liturgy may bring the nun close to mystical transport. The owner of the prayer book is instructed to speak the beginning of a vernacular song inwardly as the choir sings »Hallelujah« in liturgical celebration. The command *dic in mentali iubilo* (»say in inner jubilation«;

Appendix 11c) resonates with »the unspeakable joy of mystical transport [...] welling up wordlessly in the soul in order to praise God adequately« (Hascher-Burger, xx).

Both parts of the volume open with a »prelude« looking at the developments in Northern Germany from the perspective of the influence of the western neighbours in the Low Countries and the Rhineland. For Part I »Beginnings and Formations. Mystical Culture and the Helfta circle«, a case study of Hadewijch and the Beguine movement (→ Fraeters) demonstrates the supra-regional nature of the network of mystical thought. Although no direct textual influence can be proven, the writings of Hadewijch and Mechthild of Magdeburg display a spiritual and cultural kinship.¹² The focus then shifts to the intertwined reception of the writings of Mechthild and the nuns of Helfta, re-evaluating the transmission of Mechthild of Magdeburg's work by tracing the mutations of a single chapter (→ Poor). The chapter on Mechthild, which includes the recent discovery of the early Central German fragment of *Das fließende Licht*, leads into a discussion in the following chapter around questions of authorship, with a particular focus on Gertrude of Helfta. The transmission of mystical texts is also re-examined in the light of recently identified manuscripts with excerpts from the Helfta corpus (→ Nemes). The first part of the volume concludes with a comparative study of the translation processes involved in the transmission of *Das fließende Licht*, Mechthild of Hackeborn's *Liber specialis gratiae* and Gertrude of Helfta's *Legatus divinae pietatis* (→ Hellgardt).

The texts from Helfta reveal the complexity of the relationship between Latin and the vernacular; the direction of translation is not one way. Texts are not only translated from Latin into German as in the case of the *Liber specialis gratiae* and *Legatus divinae pietatis*, but also from the vernacular into Latin, as in the translation of *Das fließende Licht* into the *Lux divinitatis*. And indeed, in this case, the direction of translation reverses with the back-translation of the *Lux divinitatis* into the vernacular as *Licht der Gottheit*. Recent research has highlighted that in the female convents of Northern Germany there was a long tradition of a high level of education. In particular, the nuns demonstrated a good grasp of Latin, maintaining their use of it in the fifteenth century much more vigorously than was the case in the convents of Southern Germany. A rhyming letter written by the young nuns of Lüne may serve as an example; it is couched in highly rhetorical Latin, finishing with a grandiloquent flourish:

Quod nobis et vobis omnibus concedat
qui eternaliter deus vivit et regnat
si quis hec desiderat, dicat Amen, inde fiat;
valeatis valeatis valeatis et valeant omnes, qui vos valere desiderant. (Appendix 14b, fol. 12r/v)

May He who lives and reigns as eternal God grant this to all of us and to you. If anyone wishes this, let him say »Amen« and so be it. May you prosper, may you prosper, may you prosper; and may all prosper who wish you may prosper.

Nonetheless, there is a significant shift in the balance between Latin and the vernacular in the Lüneburg convents of the fifteenth century with the production of bilingual prayer books. This may be illustrated by the visualisation of the heavenly bridal procession in vivid macaronic language.

Dar sprunghen de *electi dei*
de sunghen alle: »*Laudem demus ei.*«
Dar worden de leven *testes glorie*
ghecronet mit niger ere. (Appendix 13a, 49–52)

There *God's chosen* (Col 3:12) dancing sprang; there everyone together sang: »*Let us give Him praise.*«
There the dear *witnesses of glory* were crowned with new honour.

¹² Cf. the forthcoming volume in Brill's series of Companions to the Christian Tradition: *Companion to Hadewijch*, ed. Dailey / Fraeters.

The extent to which Latin had a more dominant role in the text production of religious women in Northern Germany by comparison with that of their counterparts in Southern Germany becomes ever clearer from the perspective of the transmission and adaptation of the Helfta texts.¹³

The analysis of the beginnings and formations in part I does not only introduce the mystical culture of the Helfta Circle but also sets the scene in terms of topics and themes for part II which looks particularly at the devotional culture of the Lüneburg convents. The focus on reform, transformation and exchange is introduced by a second »prelude« chapter (→ Warnar). This delineates the preconditions for a new devotional culture in Northern Germany with reference to developments in the Low Countries.¹⁴ The Prologue to Ruusbroec by Brother Gerard indicates channels of transmission through translation:

Voirtmeer is te wetene dat her Jan Ruusbroecs ghescrifte ende boeken seer
ghemenichfuldicht worden in Brabant ende in Vlanderen ende in anderen landen daer
omtrent, ende alsoe datmense som overleide ende interpreteerde uten brabantischen dietsche
in anderen talen ende oec in latijn, om te hebben in verren landen ... (Appendix 7a).

Furthermore it should be noted that many copies of Jan van Ruusbroec's writings and books have been made in Brabant and Flanders and other regions. Some of these works have been translated from Brabantian Dutch into other languages and also into Latin, in order to make these books available in far-away countries...

With Johannes Marienwerder's *Life* of Dorothea of Montau (→ Suerbaum), the focus of interest shifts away from the border with the Low Countries to the East. In the context of this volume, Dorothea's extraordinary *Life* provides through the figure of Marienwerder, an important link to Prussia, the Teutonic Order and the intellectual climate of Prague.¹⁵ The case of Dorothea shows how the hagiographic genre draws on the nuptial mystical tradition to make the case for saintliness. Thus, the woodcut from 1492 (Illustration 5) highlights Dorothea as a suffering saint with the arrows pointing to her body; in the German *Vita* the wounds are interpreted as signs of the love her bridegroom Christ bears her:

Got, schepper allir dinge, eyn herre allir herren, des eygin was die sele Dorothee, wolde
ouch bewisen an ir, waz rechtis her zcu ir hatte. Wen so sie irn zertlichin lichnam so
mechteclich dem geiste mit sogetaner castyunge undirtenig gemachte, vorwund mit dem
swerte gots libe und synir bittirn martir, do wolde ouch der libe herre Jhesus, ir brutegam,
an sy druckin syn gemerke zcu eyne zceichin eyner unscheydelichin libe zzwischen yn,
und vorwunte sy ouch an irn scholdirn, an armen, an der brust und uf dem rucke, achsiln,
dye, wadin und knyn... (Appendix 8a)

God, Creator of all things, Lord of Lords, to whom Dorothea's soul belonged, wanted to demonstrate what rights he had over her. When she had subjected her delicate body so strongly to the Spirit by means of such chastisement, as wounding it with the sword of God's love and His bitter pain, dear Jesus, her bridegroom, also desired to impress His marks upon her as a sign of the inseparable love between them. He inflicted wounds on her shoulders and arms, on her breast and back, her armpits, thighs, calves and knees...

Another example of nuptial mysticism feeding into hagiography but with a decidedly devotional focus is the presentation of Birgitta of Sweden (→ Andersen) in the *Sunte Birgitten Openbaringe* (1496). The author of the Low German version of Birgitta's prophetic visions abridges and adapts the revelations couching them within the framework of a saint's life. Thus, the caption of one of

¹³ Cf. the chapters on »Kloster und Bildung in Norddeutschland« in *Kloster und Bildung im Mittelalter*, ed. Kruppa / Wilke (2006), *Studien und Texte zur literarischen und materiellen Kultur der Frauenklöster im späten Mittelalter*, ed. Eisermann / Schlotheuber / Honemann (2004).

¹⁴ Cf. Warnar, Ruusbroec. *Literature and Mysticism in the Fourteenth Century* (Leiden: 2007).

¹⁵ Cf. the special issue of *Oxford German Studies* *Dorothea von Montau and Johannes Marienwerder: Constructions of Sanctity*, ed. Suerbaum / Volting (2010)

the woodcuts identifies Birgitta as the bride of Christ, while at the same time asking for her intercession: *Sancte Birgitta sponsa Cristi. Ora pro nobis* (»Saint Birgitta, bride of Christ, pray for us«, Illustration 6).

In the chapters on the *Devotio moderna* (→ Bollmann) and on fifteenth century religious song (→ Hascher-Burger), the Low Countries and Northern Germany are considered as a coherent cultural region. The collected lives of sisters in the *Devotio moderna* communities, linked to the Windesheim Chapter, reveal clearly the shift along the spectrum from the mystical to the devotional; they talk about visions and levitations, integrating them into everyday devotional practice. Although there are no extant examples of the Sister Book genre in Low German, the same tendency towards the »democratisation of mysticism« is evident in the prayer books of the Lüneburg convents; the Latin and vernacular religious songs, which evidently circulated in the whole area of the Low Countries and Northern Germany, could rekindle the mystical spark.

The final three chapters are centred on three of the six convents on the Lüneburg Heath. The bilingual text production of the convents of Wienhausen, Medingen and Lüne, which all joined the Windesheim and Bursfelde reform movement, throws the reception and transformation of mystical writing in the fifteenth century into sharp relief. The fragments of two Wienhausen liturgical Easter plays (→ Mattern) provide a unique insight into how drama could be used as an exercise in meditation and devotion. Thus the phrase *Dic nobis, Maria* (»Tell us, Mary Magdalene«; Appendix 12) from the sequence *Victimae paschali laudes* (»To the Paschal sacrifice«) sung at Easter is used in repetition allowing the nuns to inscribe themselves in the Easter story through the devotional dialogue. The same liturgical key phrases also figure prominently in the manuscripts of the prayer books produced in and for the convent of Medingen in which there is also a focus on the feast of Easter as the Latin-Low German Easter Poems show (→ Lähnemann; Appendix 13). Through the treasure trove of the letters from Lüne, the concluding chapter (→ Schlotheuber) considers how the intellectual horizons of the novices were shaped by the instruction they received as preparation for a *vita contemplativa* in strict enclosure.

The essential process of translation and transmission as outlined in this volume is captured in the following quotation from *Ein sonderlich nützlich und trostlich ... Buchlen allen den, die Gott forchten ... nützlich zu lesen* (Illustration 4; → Hellgardt). This text, printed in Leipzig in 1508, draws on two different aspects of the transmission and translation of Mechthild of Hackeborn's *Liber specialis gratiae*. The main body of the text is a Central German adaptation of the fourteenth century Dutch translation of the *Liber*. Furthermore, it was simultaneously checked against a manuscript of the original Latin text of the *Liber specialis gratiae*:

Die vorrede in das buch. der vbungen gotforchtiger vnde andechtiger menschen.

The preface to the book of exercises for god fearing and devout people

Das buch geistlicher gnaden. ader der offenwarungen. der selichen iungfrawen Mechtildis. etwan closter iungfrawen. des closters helffede im lande czu sachssen. bey Eißleben gelegen. ist vnde wirdt. von vil treflichen gelarten vnde erfarnen in der heyiligen schrifft. gelobet. das solch buch. nicht alleyne in guttigem glawben. zu gedulden sey. sondern es were auch wirdig. das es mit guldenen buchstaben. geschriben wurde. dan es beschleust in sich. vil sonderliche vnde aller eren wirdigk. lere vnde punckt. doch seindt die furnemlichsten stücke. vnde nützlichsten leren. die do gleich. als der kern dißes buchs. geachtet sein. außgezogen. vnde in ein clein buchlein zusammen getragen. domit es die gotforchtigen vnd andechtigen menschen. als zu einer teglichen vbunge stets bey der hant haben mogen.

This book of spiritual grace or revelations of the blessed virgin Mechthild, sometime nun of the convent of Helfta in Saxony near Eisleben, has been and still is praised by many excellent scholars and those well versed in Holy Scripture, so that this book should be received not only in good faith but would deserve to be written in golden letters since it contains within it much special and very praiseworthy teaching and matters; the most significant passages and the most useful teaching, which may be regard-

ed as the core of this book, have been excerpted and brought together in a small booklet so that god-fearing and devout people may have it to hand for daily exercise.

Doch ist disses buchlein nicht noch der ordenunge. des originals. ader vrsprunglichen buchs. geistlicher gnaden. geordent vnde gemacht. Sondern ßo vil man sich hat duncken lassen. das es zu der andacht dynen wolle...

This booklet has, however, not been structured and made according to the order of the original, that is the source book, but rather in the way which seemed best for devotion.

The recasting of the text into Central German illustrates how, from the sixteenth century on, the wider transmission of such texts was in the dialects of High German rather than in Low German. The decline in the usage of Low German may be attributed to a number of reasons: culturally, it had never established itself as a written form for literature as firmly as High German did; politically, the decline of the Hanseatic League reduced the reach of Low German as a *lingua franca*; economically, High German prints had a wider circulation; and finally, the supremacy of Luther's Bible translation and the flood of polemic pamphlets that followed in its wake made High German the default language for religious writing in the vernacular¹⁶ and Latin continued as the language of Divine Worship, within the Lüneburg convents even after the Protestant Reformation.¹⁷ The window of opportunity for Low German which opened with works such as Mechthild of Magdeburg's *Das fließende Licht* and produced such a rich array of devotional writing and printing in the fifteenth century comes to an end. Low German is restricted once more to oral usage. Thus, the texts discussed in this volume provide a rare opportunity to observe the interaction of Low German with Latin, High German and Dutch. From the thirteenth until the sixteenth century, the oral tradition of Low German mystical and devotional discourse is captured in written form and feeds into the broader stream of literary transmission. This process renders visible the reach of the Northern German regional networks, which extended beyond the closed religious communities. The drive of reform movements, from the beguines to the *Devotio moderna*, facilitated the spread of religious writing in the vernacular from the convent to the city, as in the case of Lüneburg, and circulated religious ideas within the Hanseatic League, as in the case of the Low German prints of the Lübeck presses.

In establishing the significance of the period and the texts covered in this volume for the history of mysticism, a region becomes visible which has been largely neglected because of a lack of high profile authors beyond the Helfta circle. What has emerged is an undercurrent of a strong mystical culture articulated in a rich variety of text types that were transmitted, rewritten and translated in devotional communities. Even though text production in Low German subsequently petered out, this northern voice can still be heard in the extant texts, giving Northern Germany a distinct presence in the religious landscape of the later Middle Ages.

¹⁶ Peters, »Das Mittelniederdeutsche als Sprache der Hanse« (1987).

¹⁷ Lähnemann, »Der Medinger »Nonnenkrieg« aus der Perspektive der Klosterreform. Geistliche Selbstbehauptung 1479–1554« (2013).